

A Wicked Pack of Cards: A Technical and Historiographic Analysis of the Occult Tarot

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The evolution of Tarot from a 15th-century parlor game to a cornerstone of Western esotericism represents one of the most complex transformations in cultural history. The seminal work, **A Wicked Pack of Cards: Origins of the Occult Tarot**, authored by Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett, serves as the definitive academic correction to centuries of myth-making. For the technical researcher or serious student of cartomancy, understanding the distinction between ludic origins and occult overlays is essential for a rigorous grasp of the medium.

Historiographic Framework: The Demystification of Tarot

The primary thesis of Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett centers on the historical reality that Tarot cards were invented in Northern Italy during the early 15th century (circa 1420-1440). For nearly 350 years, these cards—originally known as **trionfi** and later **tarocchi**—were used exclusively for trick-taking games. It was not until late 18th-century France that the deck was repurposed for divination and esoteric philosophy. This shift was not an organic evolution of hidden ancient knowledge, but rather a deliberate intellectual 'purloining' by French occultists who projected Egyptian and Hermetic myths onto the existing structure of the deck.

The Authorship Trio and Their Methodology

The strength of **A Wicked Pack of Cards** lies in the multi-disciplinary expertise of its authors:

- Michael Dummett: A world-renowned philosopher and logician at Oxford University, who brought analytical rigor to the history of games.
- Thierry Depaulis: A leading historian of playing cards and a board member of the International Playing-Card Society.
- Ronald Decker: An art historian and artist who provided the iconographic analysis necessary to trace visual lineages.

Their methodology relies on primary source evidence, including tax records, merchant inventories, and contemporary literature, rather than the speculative 'oral traditions' often cited in occult circles. This evidentiary approach establishes a clear timeline for the introduction of specific tarot-related concepts.

Core Concepts: The Transition from Game to Grimoire

To understand the 'Occult Tarot,' one must first define the technical components of the standard tarot deck as it existed before the 1780s. The deck consists of two main categories: the four suits of 'pip' cards (swords, batons, cups, and coins) and the twenty-two 'triumphs' (trumps). In a gaming context, these trumps functioned as a permanent suit of higher value used to 'trump' the other cards.

The Technical Shift in Nomenclature

The transition into the occult realm required a massive rebranding of the deck's components. The following table illustrates the shift from gaming terminology to esoteric designations:

Standard Gaming Term	Esoteric/Occult Designation	Philosophical Shift
Trumps (Trionfi)	Major Arcana	From hierarchy of social roles to archetypal cosmic forces.
Suit Cards	Minor Arcana	From point-counting tools to elemental and psychological markers.
The Popess (La Papesse)	The High Priestess	From a satire of the church to the gatekeeper of the subconscious.
The Juggler (Le Bateleur)	The Magician (The Magus)	From a street performer to a master of the four elements.

The Architecture of Occult Invention: 1781–1890

The 'Occult Tarot' was born in a specific socio-political climate: Enlightenment-era France. The book identifies 1781 as the pivotal year, following the publication of Antoine Court de Gébelin's **Monde primitif**. Court de Gébelin argued —without historical evidence—that the Tarot was an ancient Egyptian book of wisdom saved from the burning of the Library of Alexandria.

The Etteilla Model and Systematic Divination

Following Court de Gébelin, Jean-Baptiste Alliette (writing as Etteilla) developed the first systematic method for cartomancy. Etteilla's contribution was technical; he assigned specific meanings to each card when upright and reversed, and he was the first to design a deck specifically intended for divination. This **Etteilla Model** moved the Tarot away from its Italian roots and toward a pseudo-Egyptian aesthetic, creating the first 'commercial' occult deck.

The Eliphas Lévi Synthesis

In the mid-19th century, Eliphas Lévi integrated the Tarot with the **Kabbalah**. By mapping the 22 trumps to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the 22 paths of the Tree of Life, Lévi provided a mathematical and linguistic framework that made the Tarot central to Western High Magic. This synthesis allowed the Tarot to be used as a 'philosophical machine' for categorizing all human knowledge.

Comparative Analysis: Historical Evidence vs. Occult Myth

The following matrix compares the historical findings of Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett against the traditional occult narratives that persist in modern tarot literature:

Feature/Origin	Historical Fact (A Wicked Pack of Cards)	Occult Tradition / Myth
Origin Location	Northern Italy (Milan/Ferrara/Bologna)	Ancient Egypt, India, or Atlantis
Primary Function	Trick-taking card games (Tarocchini)	Preservation of secret wisdom
Early Iconography	Renaissance Christian and Social Allegories	Hermetic symbols and Hieroglyphs
Hebrew Mapping	Non-existent prior to the 19th century	Intrinsic and ancient connection
The Fool's Role	A wild card or 'excuse' in the game	The evolving soul or 'Spirit'

Technical Workflow: Decoding 'The Waste Land' Reference

The book's title, **A Wicked Pack of Cards**, is a direct literary reference to T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*. Eliot's use of Tarot imagery is an excellent case study in how the occult tarot entered the modern psychological consciousness. In the poem, Madame Sosostiris, 'the wisest woman in Europe,' uses a 'wicked pack of cards' to predict the fortunes of the poem's inhabitants.

Algorithmic Analysis of Eliot's Deck

Eliot did not use a standard deck. Instead, he blended traditional cards with his own inventions to create a literary mood. This highlights a core technical point discussed by the authors: the fluidity of tarot symbolism. When the deck is divorced from its rigid gaming rules, it becomes a mirror for the user's psyche or the author's narrative needs.

1. The Phoenician Sailor: A reference to the card of the Drowned Man (a variation of The Hanged Man).
2. The Wheel: Represents the Wheel of Fortune, denoting the cycle of suffering (Samsara).
3. The Man with Three Staves: A literal interpretation of the Three of Wands.

The authors of *A Wicked Pack of Cards* use this literary connection to demonstrate how the 'mystique' of tarot has often been more influential than its 'history.' The ambiguity of the cards allows for a 'business spell' or psychological projection, as seen in modern adaptations like **Morgan's Tarot**, which discards traditional structure for an 86-card system of irreverent, black-and-white drawings.

Practical Implementation: Critical Evaluation for Students

For those looking to apply the technical insights of *A Wicked Pack of Cards* to their own study or professional writing, the following checklist ensures a fact-based approach:

- **Verify Chronology:** Always distinguish between decks produced before 1781 (Marseille style, gaming focus) and those produced after (Waite-Smith, Crowley-Harris, occult focus).
- **Iconographic Deconstruction:** Analyze symbols based on 15th-century Italian art history rather than solely through the lens of Victorian occultism.
- **Rule of Context:** Remember that 'The Lovers' card in a 1450 deck likely represents a marriage contract or choice between vice and virtue, whereas in a 1910 deck, it represents the union of opposites or psychic alchemy.
- **Skeptical Inquiry:** When a source claims 'ancient' origins, look for primary source citations. If none exist, categorize the information as 'occult myth' rather than 'historical fact.'

Troubleshooting Common Misconceptions

In the field of tarot history, several 'failure modes' occur frequently in both academic and popular literature. Understanding these helps in producing high-quality, accurate content.

Error 1: The 'Gypsy' Origin Theory

Many 19th-century writers claimed the Romani people (referred to as Gypsies) brought Tarot to Europe. **A Wicked Pack of Cards** debunked this by showing that the Romani arrived in Europe long before the Tarot appeared, and they did not use cards for fortune-telling until long after the practice was established by Europeans.

Error 2: The Albigensian/Cathar Theory

Some theorists suggest Tarot trumps were a secret code for Cathar heretics. The authors demonstrate that there is zero iconographic evidence linking the deck to Catharism, and the timing of the deck's invention (1440s) post-dates the suppression of the Cathars by over a century.

Solution: Adherence to Ludological Data

The most robust 'solution' to these errors is to view Tarot through the lens of **ludology**. By studying how the cards were played, we see that the ordering of the trumps (which varies by region: Bologna, Florence, Milan) was determined by the needs of the game rules, not by a secret kabbalistic sequence.

The Mathematical Foundations of the Game

To truly understand the 'wicked pack,' one must look at the mathematical probability of a trick-taking game. A standard 78-card deck offers a unique complexity compared to a 52-card deck. The 22 trumps act as a fixed sequence of values (0 through 21). In game theory, this creates a 'known variable' environment where the strategy revolves around flushing out the opponent's high trumps. This technical necessity of the game is what led to the numbering of the cards—a feature that occultists later interpreted as a sequence of spiritual evolution.

Formula for Trump Value in Tarocchini

The value of a hand in various Tarot games is often calculated using a formula where certain cards (the *contatori*) have higher point values. For example:

- The Bagatto (Trump 1): 5 points
- The Fool (Il Matto): 4 points
- The World (Trump 21): 5 points
- Kings: 5 points

By understanding these scoring mechanics, the researcher can see why certain cards were designed with more elaborate art—they were the high-value pieces in a competitive environment, much like the 'face cards' in modern poker.

Implications for the Modern Esoteric Landscape

While **A Wicked Pack of Cards** is healthily critical and skeptical, its value is not in 'destroying' the occult tarot, but in providing it with a clear boundary. By separating history from myth, we are better able to appreciate the creativity of the 18th and 19th-century occultists who took a simple game and turned it into a sophisticated system of symbolic psychology. The book warrants a place on any serious student's bookshelf because it provides the 'grounding' necessary to navigate the dark back-alleyways of burnout, depression, and imposter syndrome often

found in unvetted esoteric study. It delivers the reader into the light of historical optimism—where the truth of the cards is just as fascinating as the fictions built around them.

Ultimately, the work of Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett proves that the Tarot does not need a fake history to be a powerful tool. Whether used for a Renaissance game of Tarocchi, a Victorian magical ritual, or a modern business spell, the 'wicked pack' remains a testament to the human desire to find meaning in a randomized sequence of images. The transition from the gaming tables of Milan to the libraries of Paris and the poetry of T.S. Eliot confirms that the Tarot is a living, breathing cultural artifact, capable of reflecting whatever wisdom—or wickedness—the user brings to the table.

Tags: #Tarot History #Occult Origins #Michael Dummett #Cartomancy #Cultural Historiography

